

# **Nathan Pope: Pastor and Artist**

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Nathan Pope is a retired pastor from Racine, Wisconsin. He graduated from Northwestern College in 1972 and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1977. At graduation, he was assigned to serve at St. Mark's Luther Church in Citrus Heights, California. In 1980, he accepted a call to serve at First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Racine. He served there for 25 year until his retirement from full time parish ministry in 2005.

Recently, Pastor Pope agreed to be interviewed to share stories and insights into his life. The interview covered the parts of his life, such as his reasons for becoming a pastor and his experience in the WELS education system. The major points of discussion were about his life as a pastor of unique circumstances at First Evan and his work now as an artist of chancel art.

Pastor Pope was born in a family of pastors. For him, there was little doubt that this was what he was going to do with his life. From little on, he got to see what ministry in God's church was from his father. Although he does not find one person more influential than others, he stated that ministry was engrained in him from little on. His was not a 'tower room experience' but rather following a course of family tradition.

Out of the formal education, high school at Northwestern Preparatory School placed the biggest dent in him. This was a time for him to start his instruction in languages. Also during these years, his interested in history in general and church history in particular grew immensely. The classical education he received at Prep shaped his world outlook. What he learned during these years, he never forgot.

These years and his continued education at Northwestern College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary prepared him as well as anybody from the theoretical. The education he received was the very best possible. He has no bad feelings at all about his education. The only

area he stated that he was not ready for when he put on his pastor shoes was for the practically but he learned this by doing ministry.

He shared another valuable insight about his time at Northwestern. "If you couldn't make it through Northwestern, you wouldn't make it in the ministry." He did <sup>not</sup> white wash it as a place where students live as saints. He openly shared that there were problems in the dorms and that it was rough because it was all boys for the most part. He had to learn to get along with all sorts of people. Something he would use in ministry.

The most important words of encouragement he would give to one walking in the places where he trod some 35 years ago were to remember why one enters the called worker training school. It is to be trained to preach the gospel. Remember you are being trained to be a shepherd and a "curer of souls." This precious training is worth every moment.

All the moments of blessing make the struggles less difficult to handle. Part of this is learning to have tougher skin. Do not take insults too personal. There will be battles. Ministry is full of emotion. Many words flare up in the moment. At time there is "thanklessness in doing the most important thing on earth." Do not keep grudges. This means learning to forgive. "Everything is not black and white, more shades of gray."

Ministry did not happen in the normal way for Pastor Pope. His assignment to Citrus Heights did not work for him and his wife, Patty. They missed the Midwest and desired greatly to move back to their family and friends. Therefore, he slipped off his pastor shoes for a while and moved back to his hometown of, Racine.

Then, God blessed him in a special way. His home congregation decided to call a second pastor to work with his father. During the meeting, a member brought up his name and an able person for the position. He accepted the call and tied back on his pastor shoes.

This ministry required Pastor Pope to take a different mindset when entering his position. Unlike most calls where a pastor might be there for a few years and then move on, he started with the feeling, “I will be here for life.” The ministry was harder. He took things harder. By age 50, he wore himself out and started to think of alternative ministry but still as First Evan.

Working with his father was a special blessing. He knew how his father handled ministry. He communicated “telepathically” with his father. He did not need to figure out what his dad was going to do. He just knew.

The greatest difficulty was not with the people that remembered him from shared childhood. However, among his parents generation he had difficulty. “A prophet hath no honor in his hometown or in his family” fit Pastor Pope well. Even with these hardships, he would do it all over again although he would not want to do it all over again.

When the time came to begin his alternative ministry, Pastor Pope found his niche as an artist. His art from the start has been art for the church. His first job was Faith Lutheran in Antioch, Illinois. This first project took him three years to complete in his spare time while still serving as a full time pastor at First Evan. What started small has now snowballed. He has completed projects in over ten churches.<sup>1</sup> At the present time, he is working on seven commissions.

Pastor Pope holds the opinion that it is easier to find rather than to create new. In the millennia of art to glorify God almost everything has been done in one way or another. For this reason, he travels and catalogs church art from all over the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Including Birmingham, Alabama; Pewaukee, Milwaukee, and Verona, Wisconsin; Deluth, Minnesota; and St. Lucia.

His art is to set the stage for presentation of the Gospel. To do this, he believes it is best to start with the altar and then work outward. This way when the worshippers look toward the chancel they will see the altar, the symbolic representation of the Triune God as central.

To do this, one of the major problems in WELS's churches needs to be addressed. Many churches have crowded and cluttered chancels. This is because bareness scares people. People want to fill the space with as much as possible. Instead, they should allow the altar to be surrounded by negative space to bring out the positive space of the altar itself.<sup>2</sup>

Another issue that Pastor Pope has seen as he visits churches is an ongoing debate about where the font should go. Generally it is situated in one of three places. 1) In the front next to the altar to offset the ambo. 2) Down below the steps up to the altar. 3) In the back of the church. If the lay out of the church wants the altar to be the center, the first two positions subtract from the negative space around the altar. For this reason, Pastor Pope prefers the font to be in the back of the church which was the old way.<sup>3</sup>

These are just a few of the issues that come up in the work Pastor Pope does as an artist. Possibly the greatest difficulty is preparing a church for a project. People resist spending money. Even more than false doctrine from the lips of the pastor, a building project can cause more problems. "Running rough shot over people's feelings, a pastor can get into more trouble stating what color he thinks the carpet should be than preaching false doctrine."

Pastor Pope stresses that this difficult time demands education. In many situations, he would advise that it is better for an outsider to come in and speak to the congregation. This person can explain what is what "so the pastor doesn't feel like he's creating enemies." This

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<sup>2</sup> An example of positive space is your head. An example of negative space is all the empty space around your head. If your head has very little around it, it will stick out more.

<sup>3</sup> The font use to be in the back of the church or even in a separate room. Before a person could enter the sanctuary, they would be instructed and then baptized.

outsider can present the benefits of the art work in the church through the use of illustrations, stories, and image without having to take a side.

All Pastor Pope's time spend<sup>d</sup> studying art and his experiences have allowed him to put the utmost care into his dream job on which he is working now, the Chapel of the Christ at Martin Luther College. This <sup>work</sup> joy has brought him much joy because he is working with a committee of men that he does not need to educate. Instead, he has been able to use his time to give thought and love to the altar<sup>4</sup>, ambo, and triptych<sup>5</sup>. Pastor Pope shared a few of the images that he hopes will stand out and enhance worship on the campus of MLC. The whole project serves as an "exegesis in picture form" bringing out the details of the Bible passages used.

This project has also been a special joy because he gets to work with his family. His humble company has grown so that he is able to work full time with family members. He oversees the project but would not be able to complete many of the projects with<sup>o</sup>ut their help. The work is "very fulfilling to see how they work together and bring it together."

In this masterpiece as well as the rest of his work, Pastor Pope uses his time as a parish pastor to influence his artwork. Everything he crafts is influenced by practice. His is the art used by a preacher created by a preacher. This "inside track" makes his art both functional and practical.

God has blessed Pastor Nathan Pope with many gifts through which he has shared the Gospel with people. His words from the pulpit stick in the ears of the people he dearly loves as

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<sup>4</sup> The altar will focus on the Triune God and distribution. The outside of the altar will have the words "This is my body" in English, German, Latin, and Greek. The Triune God will be symbolized based on the images of the Apostle John from Revelation 5.

<sup>5</sup> The triptych's three painting will be of Jesus as the bread of life. Center: 12 year old Jesus in the Temple at the time of lunch (faculty). Right: Jesus with the Emmaus disciples (male student body). Left: Jesus with Mary and Martha (female student body). Many of the models for these painting are member of First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Racine, WI.

fellow children of God. His art vividly shows the Savior who blesses his work. May God continue to bless Pastor Pope and his work.

## Addendum: Questions for Interview

1. What made you decide to be a pastor?
2. Who influenced you?
3. What do you remember most about your studies at Northwestern and Seminary?
4. Do you feel your education prepared you to the point that you were ready for ministry?
5. Does the humbling awe while in front of a congregation go away?
6. How has years of ministry changed you?
7. You are one of a few people that have served as pastor at the congregation where he grew up. Were there special challenges? Blessings?
8. Also what was it like to serve with your dad?
9. What got you interested in art?
10. Why do you feel art is important? Is it worth the cost?
11. Where you naturally gifted in art?
12. How do you come up with ideas for your art work?
13. How should a congregation go about planning the inclusion of visual arts in their church?
14. Have there been any projects that you especially enjoyed?
15. One project you have been commissioned to do is the Martin Luther College campus chapel. Would you share the process of getting this commission?
16. Your daughter and son-in-law now work with you. What has this added to your work as an artist?
17. What would you say your experience as a pastor has added to your work as an artist?
18. Is there a project you would like to do? Your ideal project?